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THIS DOCUMENT DATE: 09-14-2018

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ARGENTINE COURT BACKS EXTRADITION BID WITH 43 MURDER CHARGES
By Roger Atwood
BUENOS AIRES, March 2, Reuter - An Argentine court today ruled that a former Army commander detained in the United States was responsible for 43 murders and 24 kidnappings and passed on the charges to back an extradition request.

The Buenos Aires Federal Appeals Court also ordered police to arrest cashiered Gen. Guillermo Suarez Mason on his return to Argentina.

Suarez Mason, now in a San Francisco jail awaiting an extradition hearing, also faces hundreds of torture charges dating from the time of Argentina's former military government.

The court said it gave its charges to the Foreign Ministry, which will then send them on to the court that is scheduled to begin extradition proceedings against Suarez Mason this week.

Suarez Mason served as commander of Argentina's powerful First Army Corps under the harsh military regime which won Argentina a reputation as one the world's worst human rights offenders.

The army expelled him shortly after the country returned to civilian rule in 1983 after he repeatedly ignored court summonses to answer charges of human rights abuses and economic corruption.

The court, which considered 635 charges against Suarez Mason, ruled that evidence was strongest in the 43 murder and 24 kidnapping cases.

Many of the charges were brought by alleged victims of gruesome torture practices during the military rule and by relatives of people said to have died while under Suarez Mason's captivity.

Acting on an Argentine request, police arrested Suarez Mason outside San Francisco in January and Buenos Aires almost immediately requested his extradition.

State prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo told reporters he was confident the U.S. court would grant the extradition because "we have abundant proof (of) extremely serious crimes."

More than 9,000 people became missing at the hands of security forces during the Argentine military's "dirty war" against guerrilla violence in the late 1970s, an official inquiry board reported after the country returned to democratic rule in 1983.

Argentine courts already have brought 16 retired military officers to trial for atrocities and some 200 others, many of them on active duty, are now awaiting trial.

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